R E P O R T  R E S U M E S

ED 016 677 TE 500 031

ENDS AND MEANS--THE LITERATURE COURSE IN THE JUNIOR COLLEGE.

BY- KOLB, GWIN J.

ILLINOIS ASSN. OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH, URBANA

PUB DATE OCT 64

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.48 10P.

DESCRIPTORS- *ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, *LITERATURE, *COURSE OBJECTIVES, *JUNIOR COLLEGES, *LITERARY DISCRIMINATION, LITERATURE APPRECIATION, HIGHER EDUCATION, COLLEGE STUDENTS, READING IMPROVEMENT, CRITICAL READING, TEACHING METHODS, ENGLISH PROGRAMS, LITERARY HISTORY, COURSE CONTENT,

THE INTRODUCTORY LITERATURE COURSE AT THE JUNIOR COLLEGE LEVEL CAN BE TAUGHT IN A MANNER COMPATIBLE WITH THE AIMS OF BOTH THE GENERAL EDUCATIONIST AND THE SPECIALIST. THE BASIC FUNCTION OF THE INTRODUCTORY COURSE IS TO INCREASE THE VARIETY, LEVEL, AND DURABILITY OF THE STUDENTS' READING PLEASURE. AS A MEANS TO THIS END THE COURSE ALSO SHOULD DEVELOP THE STUDENTS' CRITICAL ABILITIES AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE. TO HELP THE STUDENT ACQUIRE SOME SENSE OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN WESTERN LITERATURE, FOR EXAMPLE, A MOVEMENT FROM CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE BACKWARDS OR A DELIBERATE PAIRING OF NEW AND OLD BOOKS MIGHT BE A BETTER ARRANGEMENT THAN THE CONVENTIONAL ORGANIZATION. ANOTHER IMPORTANT FUNCTION OF THE INTRODUCTORY LITERATURE COURSE IS THE EXERCISE AND IMPROVEMENT OF THE STUDENTS' WRITING THROUGH THE WEEKLY OR AT LEAST REGULAR ESSAY. THIS SPEECH WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN," VOLUME 52, NUMBER 1, OCTOBER 1964, PAGES 1-10. (BN)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN

Official Publication of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English

VOL. 52, NO. 1 URBANA, ILLINOIS OCTOBER, 1964

Published every month except June, July, August, and September. Subscription price, $2.00 per year; single copies, 35 cents. *Entered as second-class matter October 29, 1941, at the post office at Urbana, Illinois, under the act of March 3, 1879.* Address all business communications to IATE Treasurer, 100 English Building, Urbana, Illinois. Address manuscripts and other editorial communications to Wilmer A. Lamar, Editor, 100 English Building, Urbana, Illinois; or to Frank Moake, Co-Editor, 100 English Building, Urbana, Illinois. Member of NCTE Information Agreement.

ED016677

TE 500 031

# Ends and Means: The Literature Course in the Junior College

GWIN J. KOLB

When he invited me to talk to you today, Mr. Rogers [Robert W. Rogers, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Illinois] urged the necessity of a very provocative set of remarks on the function of the introductory course in literature at the junior college level. I should like to oblige, naturally, but, to be frank, I am much more fearful of irritating than hopeful of stimulating this audience. For I come from a school which, thanks partly to the insistent rhetorical stance of ex-Chancellor Robert Hutchins, has long had the reputation of thinking that, as one of our own Ph.D.'s of an earlier generation told me some years ago, its faculty—and only its faculty—knew all the right questions to ask, and the right answers to make, about everything. More recently, of course, as you have probably heard, Mr. Hutchins, basking in the golden glow of the California—and Ford Foundation—sun and communing with Nobel laureate Linus Pauling, has decided that professors

*Gwin J. Kolb, Chairman of the Department of English, The University of Chicago, delivered this address before the first general session of the Junior College-University Articulation Conference held at Allerton House, March 25 and 26, 1964. We wish to thank Dr. Kolb for permission to publish his ideas which are stimulating and thought provoking not only for junior college teachers but for teachers of literature in secondary schools and universities as well.*

*In this Bulletin, also, you will find problems which two University of Illinois students, Judy Pomierski, a junior, and Lynne Baker, a graduate student in English, encountered when they transferred into the University from junior colleges.*

*The Junior College-University Articulation Conference was so successful that another will be held at Allerton House on April 28 and 29, 1965.*

are worse than ordinary men and scientists worse than ordinary professors. Exactly where this leaves teachers at Chicago—and, indeed, Mr. Hutchins himself—is not quite clear; but it strengthens my desire to avoid, in both thought and action, any appearance of the dogmatic and self-righteous.

My second disability is the fact that, though I took one version of such a course when I was a freshman back in 1937, I have never actually taught an introductory course in literature. English composition, yes—eleven sobering, often frustrating, occasionally exhilirating years of it—but not a course whose primary function is to introduce college students to the reading and analysis of literary texts. I did practice teach once—a unit on Scott's *Lady of the Lake* for three weeks to a class of ninth graders. All I remember of the experience is that the students were politely unresponsive; that, with considerable accuracy, they called the regular teacher Butterball; that this young woman was madly in love with the athletic coach and would often call me to the window at the beginning of class to admire his prowess in playing volley ball; and that the worthy couple were married soon after and produced in rapid succession two sets of twins. Educationally valuable as I guess my practice teaching was, the harsh truth remains that it did not equip me to talk about introductory courses in literature. In a very real sense, then, I am ignorant of the subject on which I am supposed to be provocative.

On the other hand, I do have some qualifications for my task else I certainly would not have agreed to undertake it. In his invitation to discuss a course I've never taught, Mr. Rogers included the wonderfully consoling phrase "function as you see it." And my opportunities have been numerous—maybe all too numerous—for viewing the basic literature course from several different locations in the academic landscape. As a regular member of our college faculty, I've heard a variety of debates, good and bad, long and short, formal and informal, about the proper role of the humanities sequence in a program of general education. As a sometime worker on the composition staff, I've taken part in many exchanges concerning the possibility of merging the writing and literature courses in a new creation that would achieve more effectively than either the functions of both. Twice within the past twelve years, I have served on a Departmental committee charged with reviewing, and making recommendations about, the undergraduate major in English. And right now I'm the *ex officio* chairman of another group responsible for examining, and pro-

posing changes in, all aspects of the three programs—B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.—in English at Chicago.

I itemize my collection of committee assignments, which doubtless sound drearily familiar to many of you, not really to establish my right to your time and attention but primarily to suggest the multiplicity of purposes that, depending on the observer's angle of vision, the introductory course in literature may be expected to fulfill. It may be considered as both the first and the last systematic exposure of undergraduates to the "best that has been said and thought in the world." Treated thus, its ultimate rationale rests, I suppose, on a conception of the human animal that stresses the *human* more than the *animal,* that appeals to our unique capacities for thought, passion, and action: "better," in the blunt words of John Stuart Mill, "to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied." More immediately, such a view relates the course to the education of an informed and responsible citizenry in a democratic society. Despite the chilly warnings of considerable experience and perceptive surveyors, of whom Professor Kitzhaber is the most recent example, enthusiastic—or harassed—curriculum-planners often expand the ends of the literature course to include the only sustained practice in writing given to most students during the two or four years they're in college.

Arguments for the course, whether pure or tinged with papers, as an essential part of a liberal education clearly assume a clientele able to profit from it; and they also imply or, to be consistent, ought to imply a required rather than an elective course for all students in the general education program. The so-called Hutchins college at Chicago rigidly observed the latter stipulation, and the influx of World War II veterans provided a steady supply of qualified, eager participants during the late 40's and early 50's. A couple of years later, however, when a supposedly mature twelve-year old girl threatened to throw an eraser at me because I was not returning the set of essays on my desk fast enough to suit her neurosis, I realized, rather dramatically, that teaching, even in the best of all possible colleges, requires the teachable, that pedagogical goals and functions must always be accommodated to the abilities we actually find in the classroom.

I have only sympathetic admiration for the wide variety of educational services which junior colleges are offering to an equally varied student body, consisting in some places, so I've been told, of semi-literate youngsters without high school diplomas, candidates for the A.A.—and later for the Bachelor's—degree,

at least a few potential graduate students, and mature men and women who have no wish for any sort of degree. And since education for "slow learners," "the culturally deprived," adults, and other special groups presents problems falling entirely outside my competence, I want to make it clear that all my remarks today posit minds able to profit significantly from what we call, rather dreamily sometimes, "college level instruction, in a year-long course."

Even when it is deemed a fundamental ingredient in a general education, the introductory course in literature commonly belongs, either officially or by default, to the English Department, whose members are responsible for its organization and operation. It is thus treated as the first step on the often mysterious road leading to the B.A. in English. Being inevitably human and understandably solicitous of our specialties, we English teachers frequently think that the initial step should anticipate the last, that the literary macrocosm should mirror the scholarly microcosm. I try my best to be objective in examining the reading lists for introductory courses, whether at Chicago or elsewhere, but the damned spot will not easily out: if Dr. Johnson appears nowhere—not even among the recommended texts—I grow vaguely uneasy; if the whole of the eighteenth century has been skipped, I become actively alarmed. A former colleague, convinced that T. S. Eliot's reputation far exceeds his means, fought many a committee battle (all unsuccessful, I'm afraid) to remove *Prufrock* from the required list of readings for our humanities course and to substitute, instead, selected lyrics of his own favorite, Ben Jonson, who, I was informed regularly over afternoon coffee, made "mealy-mouthed Eliot look like the second-rater he really is."

With notable exceptions, the greater the professor's distance from actual participation in the first course the more insistent his belief that the remote should approximate the familiar. A distinguished medievalist of my acquaintance, still doubtless grumbling in retirement, for many years held almost every passerby his office with a glittering eye while he lamented the incredible ignorance of our doctoral candidates, who came to his classes, he declared, innocent of any knowledge of the subject: "Why," the unhappy man would conclude raising an inquiring eye to mute heaven, "can't they teach *Beowulf* instead of Homer in that humanities sequence I'm told is so wonderful?" Among my own generation of scholars, I sense a recurring if transient inclination to stuff the literary stocking with such assorted goodies as bibliography, classical mythology, the Bible, concentration on a specific

topic (tied up neatly in a research paper), and the like—all on the ground that our majors should certainly receive these gifts before they come to more advanced courses and that students in other areas will also benefit from our largess.

Nursing, at least occasionally, some of these professional longings and haunted at the same time by Jacques Barzun's recent convocation elegy on the death of liberal education in America, the ordinary member of a college or university English Department may be tempted to consign the responsibility—and the blame—for the introductory course to the high schools, which, as every reader of Conant professes to know, are failing to do their proper jobs. Yielding to this attractive temptation would be a mistake, I think, since even if our supposedly errant predecessors immediately returned en masse to the paths of educational righteousness, the opportunities for civilizing and humanizing mankind (ourselves included) are at best so few and feeble, the forces of savagery and inhumanity so many and massive, that not a single chance ought to be lost.

What, then, you may well ask of the solemn pontificator, should the introductory course in literature really *do*? In reply, let me fall hurriedly back on two or three resounding cliches: no course, however brilliantly conceived and executed, can serve all its would-be masters; a choice must be made, and that choice will always disappoint some of the people whose cooperation is indispensable to its success. But disappointment need be calamity only to the hopelessly rigid. Granted a sufficiently broad (*vague* the unreconstructed would call them) group of terms, the ends of the introductory course can surely be compatible both with the aims of the general educationist and with those of the specialist, although probably closer—if our program at Chicago is at all representative—to the former than to the latter.

As it proceeds along its sensible middle way, the introductory course, so it seems to me, should seek, first of all, to make the reading of literature such an enjoyable experience that students will want to go on doing it regularly for the rest of their lives. The delights of books are usually less flamboyant than the pleasures of the table, the bed, and the bottle; indeed, as Sir Leslie Stephen once remarked of the "speculative" tendency, they should be classified, perhaps, among the weaker impulses of the human race. But they are authentic delights just the same—every person in this room bears eloquent witness to that—and what they lack in intensity they gain several-fold in longevity.

They are not all of a kind, obviously, and not all of them can or should be dealt with in the introductory course. Though its charms are undeniable, possibly even irresistible, the appeal of *Fanny Hill* scarcely qualifies as a joy in sheer reading. The fascinated suspense which a Chicago society matron, member of the Vassar class of '33, confided to me she felt in perusing Mary McCarthy's *Group* to see if she was in it (she concluded, by the way, with a delicious mixture of relief and chagrin that she wasn't)—this fascinated suspense clearly ranks near the top of the good woman's memorable moments with books; but her reaction was patently different from the sort of pleasure we should seek to arouse or maintain in our students. Lest we academics seem the pure and gemlike spirits we clearly are not, let me candidly add that the unusual popularity of Phil Roth's *Letting Go* on the Chicago campus owes far more to anxious curiosity than to the impartial scrutiny of art for art's sake.

Extra-literary causes play an important part in the determination of literary tastes, even of cultural brahmins, and every skilful teacher recognizes and tries to take advantage of this fact. Yet our central concern, I think, should be to nourish our students' individual capacities to enjoy literature for its own sake, to savor verbal art as the most accessible, the most varied, the most fertile, of humanistic achievements. So exalted a description necessarily assumes the existence of both intellectual and imaginative works within the pleasure-dome of literature—of history, philosophy, biography, and rhetoric as well as fiction, drama, and poetry. A substantial portion of the introductory course, it therefore follows, should be devoted to the cultivation of a bent for the kinds of texts which may also be treated in other areas of the curriculum.

Despite notable improvement in the high schools—and unlike Professor Barzun—I see no reason for believing that either junior or senior colleges have lost their *raison d'être.* On the contrary, most freshmen at Chicago are still held for the humanities requirements, and many of them testify freely to the moderate (at least) pleasure and profit they derive from their acquaintance with such rank strangers as Plato, Aeschylus, Aristotle, Herodotus, Milton, Fielding, Gibbon, Karl Marx, even George Orwell of the *Homage to Catalonia*; English majors, in their junior and senior years, flushed with excitement over (say) the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* or the *Life of Savage*—to limit my instances to the eighteenth century—often regret their previous failure to meet Hume and Johnson outside the pages of a literary history; and even among our graduate students a majority of the M.A.

class in analysis and criticism always discover new life and power in such old friends as *Macbeth,* the *Declaration of Independence,* the *Federalist* papers, *To Autumn, My Last Duchess,* and *Heart of Darkness.*

The first function of the introductory course, I repeat, is to increase the variety, level, and durability of our students' reading pleasures. I would not go quite so far in my pursuit of this goal as Churchill supposedly did when he said he would make a pact with the devil himself in order to defeat Hitler, but I would gladly enlist the aid of virtually every ally I can think of—most brands of academic corn, recordings and lectures, TV, the movies most emphatically (I suspect, incidentally, that Albert Finney has led more Chicago youngsters to *Tom Jones* than the combined appeals of critics and criticism, ancient and modern), and so on.

A second duty of the course arises from the first. Briefly and bluntly, its function is criticism at the present, and for all foreseeable, time. On this point, T. S. Eliot is surely right in his insistence that we should not leave evaluation to the fellows who write for the papers and Northrop Frye is surely wrong, if I read him correctly, in his assertion that we academics should resign judicial responsibilities to reviewers of the sort best exemplified by Edmund Wilson. For if we are to stimulate and sustain their enjoyment of books, we must offer our students a diet of texts, both belletristic and intellectual, which, with few exceptions (and these for comparative purposes), move us to passionate admiration and elicit from us the most persuasive cases we can make for them both as unique creations and also as just intimations of future reading delights. Students are commonly ignorant, frequently naive, and occasionally crude; but they are seldom fools. Unless we like the works we teach and make clear our reasons, they may not respond to them at all. Two or three years ago in *College English,* a report on undergraduate courses in the eighteenth century concluded with what seems to me to be still sounder advice for the planners of the introductory course in literature: exhibit only the crown jewels, save the rough diamonds for more advanced classes.

Selection and explanation are only half of the critical task, however. We must also foster in our students the ability to move from the simple avowal of responses to the complicated grounds of judgment in literary matters, to attach a *because* to the facile *I like—or dislike—it,* and to do this with growing sensitivity, awareness of critical principles, sophistication, and assurance. Though the words roll trippingly from the tongue, I promptly

acknowledge the magnitude of the actual job and the impossibility of ever finishing it. The prospect is awesome—trying, year after year, to lick into decent critical shape a heterogeneous mass of post-adolescents, and making them like the licking as we go along.

Something, nevertheless, can be done. Specifically, and assuming a perceptible measure of intelligent cooperation, we can always insist on responsible readings of books, whatever the kinds, with the accuracy and adequacy of interpretations being relentlessly tested by verifiable evidence. We can gradually bring our students to recognize the absence of a single, encompassing, absolute truth, the lack of a critical Open Sesame, in the rich world of letters; and to grasp, on the contrary, the relativity of all answers to the kinds of questions raised by the investigator. In our classes, we can analyze some of the great critics from Aristotle to Croce, perhaps in connection with other works (for instance, the *Poetics* in the context of a discussion of the *Odyssey* or a portion of Coleridge's *Biographia* just after an examination of a poem by Wordsworth), and thus widen our students' acquaintance with notable intellectual structures at the same time we are sharpening their critical faculties. And by both precept and example we can accustom our charges to the practice of distinguishing instead of collapsing (the opportunities for that are everywhere), of applying different modes of analysis and different criteria to different types of works, of never mistaking *Don Quixote* for *Othello* or either for *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

A corollary of this remark brings me to still a third function of the introductory course. Distinctions connote similarities; criticism implies history; tradition as well as the individual talent is requisite for the full enjoyment and understanding of books. In addition to providing a steady fare of solid merit, we should make a steady effort, as a part of refining and enhancing their palate, to help our classes acquire at least a rudimentary sense of continuity and change in the literary affairs of Western man. I do not, let me say quickly, propose the transformation of English teachers into partial Toynbees; even if that were possible, it wouldn't be desirable. What I have in mind is quite limited and specific. All our required readings, I think,—both the texts discussed in class and those assigned but not discussed—should include, besides the principal genres, representatives of several national literatures (some in translation, naturally) and historical periods, ranging from Ancient Greece to Contemporary America. At regular intervals during the course (say at the end of the treatment of a given kind), we should ask our students to induce,

wholly on the basis of their readings, tenable if very narrow generalizations about those aspects of a literary form which remain constant, and those which vary, from country to country and age to age.

My own experience suggests that, without exception, English majors apprehend—not memorize but lay hold of—obvious but exceedingly complex facts of historical change much more quickly when they are led to them by their firsthand reactions and perceptions than when they hear about them from even the most discerning of commentators. *The Rape of the Lock* and *Tintern Abbey* simply outshine *The Mirror and the Lamp* as artistic and temporal events, splendid though Professor Abrams' volume undoubtedly is. And majors are only one or two removes from the introductory course.

If we wish to be more ambitious in fulfilling the third function of the course, we can call on specialists to supplement the efforts of individual teachers. At Chicago and elsewhere a series of lectures on such subjects as Greek comedy, Edmund Burke, the English Utilitarians, Hawthorne, etc. is designed to attach otherwise floating texts to particular minds and milieus. The best of these performances almost certainly serve the ends of the humanities sequence; the worst unfortunately tend to turn know-nothings into know-it-alls and hence to create a well nigh ineducable breed for later instruction in literary history.

Finally, before passing on to other matters, I'd like to voice my rising doubt that simple chronological organization and discussion of works of the same kind suffice to give students much felt realization of the past. Like most of the rest of us, they are essentially creatures of the present, who have real trouble recovering many of their yesterdays. They therefore need to be jolted into virtually every literary world save their own. A movement from the twentieth century backward or a deliberate pairing of new and old books might thus produce a firmer historical awareness than the conventional arrangement.

So far I've talked about the cultivation of lasting pleasure in imaginative and intellectual literature as a basic function of the introductory course, and the development of critical abilities and historical perspective as means to that ultimate end. But how can we estimate our progress in reaching our goals? Well, students volunteer some evidence themselves, consciously or unconsciously. A few days ago a young man came running into my office to announce enthusiastically that Conrad's *Nostromo* was one of the best books he had ever read. Last Saturday night, during a per-

formance of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, I overheard another say to his neighbor, "I told her she would have to get used to plays of an off-beat nature." And as we were walking out after the show still another remarked, "I don't feel depressed, the catharsis was complete"; whereupon his date replied, "I still don't understand that catharsis stuff."

Although less spontaneous than these comments, class discussions serve the same purpose. If we don't have them, we should—despite the howls of the budget officer; if ours aren't very good, we should try to make them better. When all is said and done, however, the most valuable testing device—most valuable precisely because it is much more than merely a testing device—remains that bane of the harried teacher's existence, the weekly or at least regular essay. Writing forces the student to put up instead of allowing him to shut up. It brings him face to face with his moment of critical truth and historical reality. It gives at least a semblance of order and focus to blurred impressions and opinions. It substitutes propositions for dangling terms or exposes the latter more clearly. It affords us our best chance to assess the quality of the mind behind the words, to correct, cajole, coax, and comfort. Notwithstanding the grim prospect of piles upon piles of graceless, shapeless writing, the exercise and improvement of our students' prose thus ranks as a fourth function of the introductory course in literature. To paraphrase Dr. Johnson on scholarly footnotes: student essays are evils but they are necessary evils.

Being fiction fans, let us suppose, in conclusion, that an educational millennium has arrived and that our students consistently write engaging papers, replete with analytical and historical insights, on the continuous joys of reading good books. Has the introductory course then discharged its obligation to society? Are we turning out for the republic a race of philosopher citizens, who can readily adapt their arts, both of peace and of war, to the trade of English teacher? I'm afraid the only honest answer to the question is a decided No. We hope that such a course will make men a little better, a little wiser; we're reasonably sure it won't make them worse; we insist merely that it keeps available a rich source of human pleasure at a time when 1984 seems uncomfortably close at hand.